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TO SECRETARY GATES FROM THE AMBASSADOR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2017
TAGS: PGOV PREL MARR OVIP ES
SUBJECT: YOUR VISIT TO EL SALVADOR

Classified By: Ambassador Charles L. Glazer, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶11. (SBU) I'm delighted that you'll be visiting El Salvador. Your presence here will underline the importance of El Salvador's contribution to coalition efforts in Iraq, and offer a boost to our efforts to address the nation's most pressing problem: a public security crisis that has spiraled out of control. The Salvadorans will press you for concrete signs of US appreciation for their presence in Iraq and will urge you to help address funding shortfalls. We should support GOES requests that reinforce our shared counter-drug, counter-trafficking and public security goals, while offering an important symbolic gesture, such as Major Non-NATO Ally status (MNNA), to our Salvadoran allies.

Political/Economic Overview and Migration Issues

¶12. (C) President Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca of the governing ARENA party assumed office June 1, 2004 after winning a strongly-contested presidential race with 57.7 percent of votes cast. President Saca's center-right ARENA party holds 34 of 84 seats in the Legislative Assembly, but aligns with smaller parties to form a working majority on important issues. The leftist FMLN holds 32 seats. President Saca has made the reinvigoration of El Salvador's economy, the creation of jobs, and improvements in the nation's infrastructure his highest priorities; however, staggering rates of violent crime deflect attention from his economic priorities. The public security crisis could have a major, negative impact on 2009 presidential and legislative elections. We are working closely with the GOES to address this crisis, both by providing resources where we can and by advising the Government on police, legal and criminal procedure reforms.

¶13. (SBU) The economy has been growing slowly at only about two percent per year since 1999, despite its excellent fundamentals. However, last year El Salvador achieved its largest GDP growth rate in a decade, 4.2 percent. El Salvador was the first nation to sign and implement CAFTA-DR; early results are encouraging. In 2007, the positive trend continues with an estimated economic growth rate of 4.5 percent. Some twenty-five percent of Salvadorans live in the United States, many illegally. Since the 2001 earthquakes, between 250,000 and 280,000 Salvadorans have benefited from Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and have been able to live and work legally in the United States. Remittances from Salvadorans living abroad provide an important source of income for their families in El Salvador. In

2006, remittances amounted to \$3.3 billion, approximately 18% of GDP.

Public opinion polls also show that 7 out of 10 Salvadorans would immigrate to the United States if given the chance. The U.S. debate over immigration reform is followed very closely here.

Civilian-Military Relations

14. (C) The Salvadoran Armed Forces (ESAF) are capable, professional, and subordinate to civilian authority. The military consistently receives high approval ratings in public opinion polls, due largely to its response to national emergencies, including earthquakes, hurricanes, and outbreaks of infectious diseases such as Dengue. Salvadoran soldiers also support police in counter-narcotics efforts, anti-gang patrols, rural patrols, customs inspections, and reform-school training for juvenile convicts.

15. (C) The ESAF continues to focus on force modernization in a constrained budget environment. The ESAF currently has approximately 12,000 total service members and 2,500 administrative personnel. The ESAF's funding level of USD 111 million has changed very little for several years, representing a slightly declining percentage of the national budget. The USD 5 million increase for the ESAF in the latest budget is obligated to a pay raise, so there is no net increase in funds available for operations, training, maintenance, and modernization. While El Salvador currently receives modest FMF allocations, (2nd highest in this AOR), military officials have expressed their desire for considerable increases. The focus of our FMF expenditures is on developing host nation capabilities in disaster relief, peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and illicit trafficking.

OIF Service

16. (U) Since August 2003, the GOES has deployed over 3000 troops to Iraq. The first contingent consisted of 360 troops while the 2nd through 8th consisted of 380. The 9th contingent deployed in August with 280 troops, a reduction of 100 troops based on a shift in mission (primarily HA&R projects). To date, they have had 5 KIAs and over 50 WIAs. One soldier, (CPL Platero) has been at BAMC in Texas recovering from a severe leg injury since October 2006 and is expected to remain there another year. The GOES has pledged to remain as long as needed; Salvadorian counterparts insist that the US stood by them during their difficult times, and that they will stand with us. Salvadoran troops have performed admirably for almost four years in humanitarian and reconstruction efforts. They have also coordinated the reconstruction of local police stations, hospitals, and schools, as well as public works projects such as road improvement and electrical services.

17. (C) Salvadoran soldiers were intimately involved in the training and equipping of the Iraqi Civil Defense Forces in Najaf, Al Hillah, and now Al Kut. The national press has positively portrayed the real impact of ESAF efforts and the gratitude of Iraqi provincial leaders.

In December 2006 the Legislative Assembly passed a one year extension to President Saca's authority to maintain troops in Iraq through December 2007. Opposition to Salvadoran involvement in Iraq runs as high as 70 percent, but Saca portrays himself as a faithful friend of the US, and we believe he will work very hard to renew that authorization later this year.

Peacekeeping and International Agreements

18. (SBU) The GOES is interested in peacekeeping opportunities, although the commitment in Iraq and current ESAF budget constraints make such new deployments of troops unlikely for the time being. The UN has certified ESAF as competent for full participation in UN Peacekeeping Operations. The USG has recently released new funding and supplies for training the ESAF to take part in the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative (GPOI) in support of a long-term desire of the Conference of Central American Armed Forces (CFAC) to deploy a combined peacekeeping unit from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua. El Salvador is not a signatory to the International Criminal Court, but signed and ratified Article 98 provisions to the Rome Statute with the U.S. in 2004. In late 2006 the legislature approved a 505 Agreement for U.S.-provided assistance; the Assembly has also approved an agreement for the

protection of classified military information and the DoD/DoS preferred global format Status of Forces Agreement.

Counternarcotics and Counterterrorism Issues

¶9. (C) The Salvadoran government is a valuable partner in the war on drugs . El Salvador is a transit country for narcotics, mainly cocaine and heroin. El Salvador is host to Central America's only Cooperative Security Location (CSL), as well as to Latin America's International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA), which provides law enforcement training to personnel from El Salvador and the region. U.S.-funded training and equipment have contributed significantly to improvements in the National Civilian Police (PNC) Counternarcotics Division. El Salvador's geographic position makes it vulnerable to those trafficking drugs, people, and guns to or from the United States. JIATF-South, with its ability to provide Salvadoran authorities with real-time intelligence, is a great asset; however, the ESAF need additional resources to help us take full advantage of JIATF's capabilities.

MNNA Status

¶10. (C) In 2006, a visiting DoD official raised with GOES counterparts the possibility of El Salvador's entering into MNNA Status. The GOES was delighted at the opportunity, and since then has pressed us for a formal invitation to become a MNNA. MNNA status would be appropriate recognition of El Salvador's contribution to our joint efforts in Iraq and would solidify our military-to-military relationship prior to and beyond the 2009 presidential and legislative elections. Embassy San Salvador strongly supports granting MNNA status to El Salvador.

Glazer